

# THE APACHE VIOLIN: AN ANCIENT INSTRUMENT MOVES INTO A NEW CENTURY

By Chesley Goseyun Wilson, Ruth Longcor-Harnisch Wilson, and Bryan Burton

*Tsii'edo'a'tl* — “The Wood That Sings” — The Apache Violin... this traditional instrument indigenous to the Apache peoples of the American Southwest has its origins in the remotest times of Apache oral history, yet has recently been used by the avant-garde Kronos Quartet in Brent Michael David's innovative work *Mtukwekok Naxkomao* (“The Singing Woods”). From its origins as a quiet, intimate instrument with horsehair or sinew strings, natural rosins, and colors the Apache violin has come into the late twentieth century adapting to modern performances with the use of commercial steel violin strings and rosin, contemporary lacquers and paints and even electronic amplification to attract greater audiences than at any time in its long history.

Once thought by some ethnomusicologists and anthropologists to be a myth or a copy of the European violins brought to the Americas by Spanish explorers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Apache violin has gained new recognition and cultural validity through the efforts of master violin maker and player Chesley Goseyun Wilson, the latest member of a distinguished family of Apache musicians and instrument makers. According to the early 20th century ethnomusicologist Frances Densmore, the oldest extant Apache violins in museums and collections date back only to about 1875 with other early documentation coming in letters, diaries, and photographs by settlers and soldiers in the late nineteenth century. However, because of the natural materials used in making the Apache violin, earlier instruments would have “biodegraded” in the course of time, an argument frequently cited by Apaches to explain the lack of prehistoric instruments. Apache oral tradition places the origins of the instrument “at the beginning of the earth”.

Other claims for recent origins have included the story that certain Apaches began to make the instruments just for sale to tourists coming through Arizona on railroads. This is easily disproved by considering that photographic and journal evidence of the instrument's existence predates the arrival of the railroad in Apache territory by several decades.

The very structure and appearance of the Apache violin seems to argue against a European model: the body is cylindrical and only one string is found on traditional instruments. Chinese

ethnomusicologist Za M Su believes there is a strong connection between ancient Mongolian culture and that of the Athabascan tribes of North America and cites the stringed instruments as one example. A more striking comparison between Asian and Apache stringed instruments may be made between the Apache violin and the *chengui* — a cylindrical instrument with from one to four strings played by a curved bow made from a small tree branch. A visual comparison of the Yaqui, Mayo, and Tarahumara violins which closely resemble European violins — shape, scroll, tuning pegs, number of strings — with an Apache violin is perhaps the simplest argument in favor of an Apache original design.

In Apache culture, the Apache violin is unarguably accepted as an authentic instrument created within the traditions of the tribe. The instrument is not referred to as a “violin” by the Apache, but is instead simply *tsii'edo'a'tl*, “the wood that sings” in reference to its sweet, delicate tone which some describe as cross between that of a flute and a dulcimer (quite a contrast from early observers' comments such as “sounds like a cat with its tail caught in a fence”). An earlier researcher refers to the instrument by the name *ki'zh ki'zh di hi* — “the buzz buzz sound”.

Some contemporary Apache, however, think this may have been told to this man in jest. The term “fiddle” is considered offensive by the Apache and is seldom used to describe the Apache violin.

The Apache violin is used for playing many types of music including social dance songs, ceremonial songs, corn beer drinking songs, and improvisations for the instrument. Another use of the instrument is in healing rituals — no less a figure in Apache history than Geronimo made and played the Apache violin. (Some modern instruments are patterned after those made by Geronimo. Arizona State Museum Apache specialist Diane Dittmore states that a violin said to have been made by Geronimo is in the Peabody Museum collection at Harvard University.)

Among the most famous makers of the Apache violin was Amos Gustina, an uncle of Chesley Wilson. His instruments varied in size from 40 to 67 cm in length and occasionally used two horsehair or

sinew strings. Many were elaborately decorated and have been collected by individuals and museums. (A large example is in the Arizona State Museum collection.) Instruments by Gustina



Chesley Goseyun Wilson plays the *Tsii'edo'a'tl*, or Apache Violin.

Photo courtesy of Arizona State Museum, University of Arizona.  
Helga Teiwes, photographer

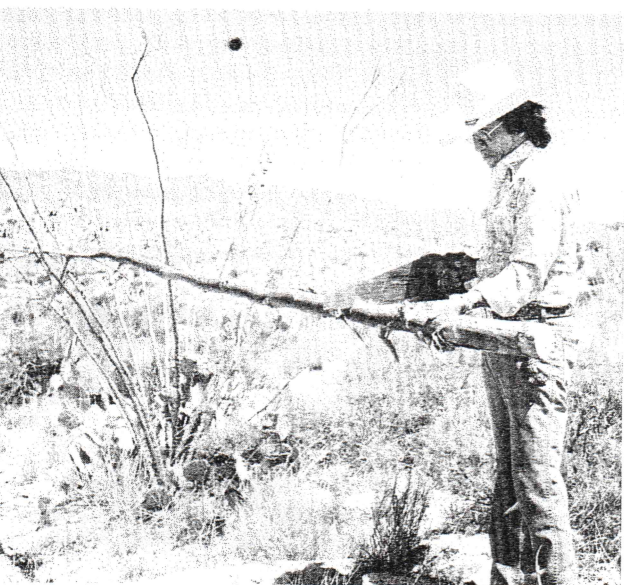


earned many awards at fairs and expositions and authenticated Gustina Apache violins are highly prized. Most contemporary instruments are considerably smaller than those made by Gustina — generally about 40 cm in length. Alan Ferg sketched Gustina's biography and instrument making techniques in "Amos Gustina: Apache Fiddle Maker" in a 1981 issue of *American Indian Art Magazine*. Photographs of several of Gustina's instruments may be found in this article.

Upper photo: Two agave plants shortly before blooming, Redington Pass area. Chesley Wilson looks on.

Lower photo: The cut agave stalk, showing the pithy interior. Chesley Wilson cuts a length suitable for two violins.

Photos courtesy of Arizona State Museum, University of Arizona. Helga Teiwes, photographer



## FROM AGAVE TO APACHE VIOLIN

The Apache violin is made from a section of the century plant (*Agave Americana*) which grows in abundance in southern and eastern Arizona. This plant is an agave and blooms only once (after 15-20 years of growth) before scattering its seeds and dying. The single twelve- to twenty-foot stalk growing from the center of the plant is the source of the body of the Apache violin. The century plant also furnishes the Apache with food, drink, and fibers.

A section of the stalk is carefully selected and cut to size. It is then hollowed out, end plugs replaced, tone holes cut into the body to focus the sound, a tuning peg inserted through two holes at the base of the instrument, a string wound around the tuning peg, and attached to the end of the instrument. A small bridge keeps the string from buzzing against the body. Decorations range from simple traditional patterns and colors to contemporary acrylic colors and special designs according to the taste of the person for whom the instrument is made. At any point during the often two or three month long process of creating an Apache violin, some flaw may be found in the stalk, a crack may develop, or a layer of sealant dry incorrectly requiring the maker to start the entire process from the beginning with new materials.

"There are a few young guys who are making cheap violins to sell at markets to the tourists. Too many use inferior stalks or skip steps along the way in their hurry to make the instrument. Sometimes the string rests completely against the body or they only paint on the tone holes!! These instruments sometimes don't last until the buyer gets them home. The people who make them the traditional way know that a good violin can't be hurried along. Quality takes patience." — Chesley Goseyun Wilson.

The bow is made from a short, bent branch (usually from willow or sumac) with horsehair attached for playing. The string, originally horsehair or sinew, is now frequently a commercial violin string. Resin is sometimes used on the bow or a "glob" of pitch may be placed on the end of the violin for the convenience of the player.

The Apache violin is played by placing the wide end against the chest and stopping the string with the fingers of the left hand while the bow is drawn across the string. As with any instrument, the tone quality varies according to the taste and skill of the player. In the hands of a skilled performer, the Apache violin is a delightfully entertaining instrument. It shows the versatility of the Apache culture in producing a fine instrument using the materials and tools placed in their lands made perfectly for them by Yusen the Creator.

## TWO APACHE VIOLINS

Two instruments made for the author by Chesley have the following dimensions and characteristics:

### VIOLIN I — (See sketches)

Finish: tan, natural

Length: 38.4 cm

Width at end: 5.6 x 5.2 cm oval shape

Width at top: 5.1 x 5.0 cm circular shape

Tone holes: 2.4 x 1.3 x 1.3 cm triangular shape centered on body beginning 8.4 cm from top; 2.1 x 1.4 x 1.4 cm triangular shape on each side of body beginning 8.4 cm from bottom. Each tone hole is outlined with a flat black paint

Peg: 13.7 cm length wooden peg inserted into 1.7 (entry) and 1.2 (exit) hole beginning 3.0 cm from top

String: Violin "e" string inserted into centered hole 5.2 cm from top extended over natural curve of top and tied to 1.0 cm end pin inserted on bottom of violin. String is tightened/loosened by turning peg. Marks are placed on peg to prevent overly tightening the string and splitting the instrument. Small flat, rectangular pieces of wood are placed near the string hole and end pin to elevate the string above the body of the instrument to prevent the string from vibrating against the body.



Open string pitch: "D", fourth line, treble clef

Decorations: Small sun symbol, yellow, red outline and four red rays beginning 2.0 cm from end; black crescent-shaped winds spirit ("four directions") symbols on either side of body beginning 13.0 cm from top; black mountain symbols (tree "peaks") down top center of body beginning 11.8 cm from top and ending 12.2 cm from bottom; 23 cm feather attached to end with 8 cm chestnut color leather strap and decorated with one piece of turquoise and one piece of white shell; CW monogram on top.

## VIOLIN 2 —

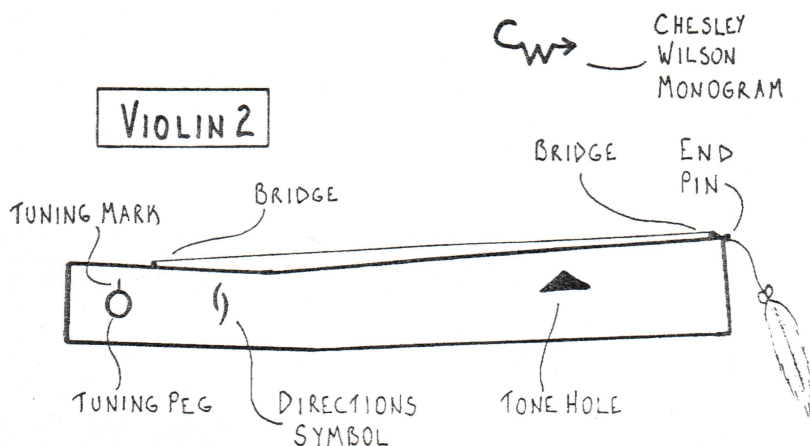
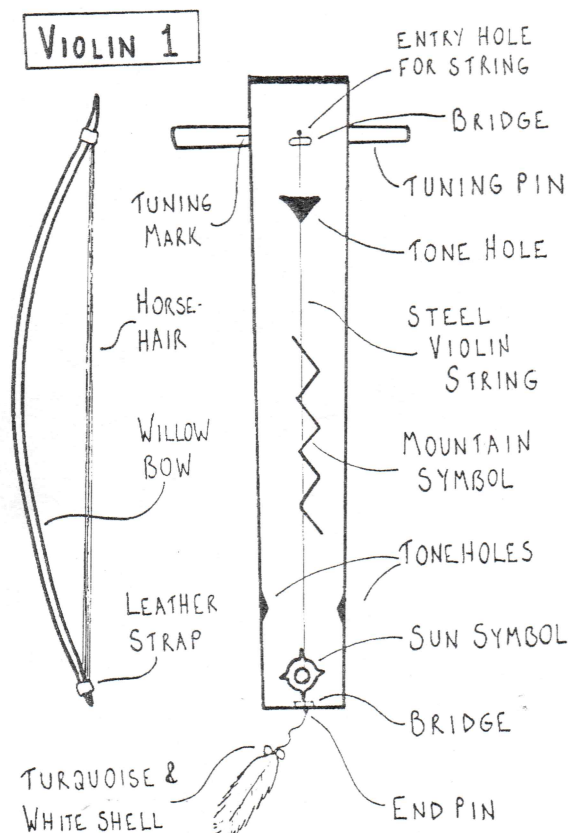
Finish: chestnut/reddish brown lacquer

Length: 37.2 cm

Width at end: 5.0 x 5.6 cm oval shaped

Width at top: 4.5 x 5.1 oval shaped

Tone holes: 2.3 x 1.4 x 1.4 cm triangular shape centered on top of body beginning 8.5 cm from top. Two 1.0 x 1.0 x 1.8 cm triangular shape on sides of body beginning 8.0 cm from end, tone holes are outlined in flat black paint.



Peg: 14.2 cm peg inserted into hole (1.7 cm entry, 1.5 cm exit) beginning 4.0 cm from top, black marks are painted on peg to prevent overly tightening string

String: Steel violin "e" string inserted into centered hole 5.9 cm from top extending over natural curve of body and tied to 0.8 cm end pin inserted into end, two small rounded pieces of wood are placed at the end pin and string hole to elevate the string above the body of the instrument and prevent rattling.

Pitch: "F" top line treble clef

Decorations: black crescent-shaped "wind spirits" symbols on either side of body beginning 6.0 cm from end, black mountain symbols (narrow) beginning 12.0 cm from top and stopping 15.0 cm from end, thin black trim on top and end; CW monogram on top, 18.0 cm feather attached to end with 11.0 cm white leather strap decorated with one piece of turquoise and one piece of white shell.

## CHESLEY REMINISCES ABOUT LEARNING TO MAKE THE APACHE VIOLIN

Following the death of his mother, Chesley spent several years living with his uncle Albert Goseyun, another distinguished maker of Apache violins, and assisted Goseyun and Gustina in their work. Upon his father's remarriage, Chesley moved back to family and continued learning traditional Apache crafts and music.

I was probably five or six when I started watching them — how they make and how they play the violin. I was probably ten years old when I tried to put one together.

Chesley Wilson spent his childhood observing his uncles Albert Goseyun and Amos Gustina making traditional Apache violins. (In Apache style, he refers to them as his "grandfathers".) In addition to learning the craft of violin and flute making from two acknowledged masters, he began to learn the vast repertory of songs and dances from the Apache culture. When he returned to Tucson in the early 1980s, Chesley began to make violins and flutes copying the instruments of his "grandfathers".

Making a violin begins with the search for a suitable century plant stalk. It must be dried to the point of having a dark reddish skin color with a slightly gray surface coat. The stalk must be inspected for insect damage or other potential bad places on the stalk. If the stalk is too green, a toxic reaction from fluids may occur and stalks which are too brittle will break too easily when they are worked.

After a stalk is selected, Chesley must saw several sections from the plant to be used for violin bodies. He must work carefully to avoid injury from the spiny dagger-like leaves near the plant's base. It may take several hours to accumulate about a dozen sections of appropriate quality and size. Occasionally, an entire day's search may be fruitless.

After the sections are brought home, they must be thoroughly dried before the actual work of making the violin begins. After removing the outer bark (revealing a tan wood), the pithy interior of the stalk is

cleaned out either by using a long knife or splitting the section in half and scraping out each half. If the section is halved, each half must be carefully sanded and shaped so they halves may be rejoined without leaving a crack in the body. Following these steps, the parts are glued together and wooden caps glued onto the ends of the violin body. Sections of the stalk which have not been hollowed or appropriately shaped pieces of balsa wood may be used for the caps, but Chesley uses a high-quality plywood. This phase of construction may take several weeks.

Sound holes are carved into the body to focus and enhance the sound of the violin serving the same function as "f holes" on the European violin. These holes are traditionally round, triangular, or diamond shaped. Another hole is drilled a few inches from the larger end of the body for placement of a tuning peg



made from cottonwood or willow. A string — frequently a commercial violin string — is wrapped around the peg which is then twisted to bring proper tension to the string. The string stretches across the top of the violin, over a tiny bridge, and attaches to the small end of the body. The natural curve of the stalk is used to determine the best placement of the string to prevent buzzing against the body of the violin and make fingering easier when playing.

Traditional or contemporary designs decorate the now completed body of the violin. "I use traditional Apache symbols and colors. I use the four direction colors (black = east; yellow = west; white = north; blue or green = south)." Any color, however, may be used. Some museums and collectors prefer the softer "weathered" colors of violins made in the last century, but more vivid colors are more commonly used on instruments made for the public. Other symbols include a circle to represent the sun, a sawtooth pattern to represent mountains, crescents to represent the wind spirits. Sometimes, Chesley adds hummingbirds, clouds, water, or special designs to the bodies of the violin. A feather is often tied to the violin and decorated with symbolic turquoise and shell.

At least two coats of enamel paint and several layers of a sealant are used to enhance resonance. Construction of a quality Apache violin may take as much as two or three months.

The violin bow is made from a willow branch (bark removed) which is bent and tied when wet to give it the proper shape. The inside of the bow is slightly flattened. Horse hair is attached to the dried bow with bits of leather.

Simple violins are sold for a few hundred dollars with more elaborately designed or customized instruments priced accordingly. Chesley's fine violins are used by many Apache performers and are sought by collectors and teachers. Instruments have been made for museums (including the Smithsonian Institution) and movie production companies, and a set was commissioned by the Kronos Quartet for a special work featuring Apache violin.

On both self-recorded and commercially made recordings, Chesley Goseyun Wilson performs violin versions of several traditional Apache songs. Included are "Blessing Song," "When I Was Young," and "I'll Go With You." The notated melodies found in the World Music Press publication *When The Earth Was Like New* (Wilson, Wilson, Burton) are pitched for an instrument using a modern "e" string. Listeners should carefully observe and identify differences between the notated versions, the vocal versions performed also performed by Chesley, and violin versions. Because of the tradition of improvisation, there will be variants from performance to performance. In addition, microtones are produced on the instrument due to the limited space for finger placement on the instrument. Pitch bending frequently occurs as notes are adjusted or as the fingers go farther up on the string requiring the string to be pressed down a greater distance. These inflections are characteristic of Apache violin music.

Mohican composer Brent Michael Davids' recently completed *Mtukwekok Naxkomao* (*The Singing Woods*) will be included on an

upcoming album by the Kronos Quartet. This unique work not only incorporates Native American melodic fragments, but requires performers to use an Apache violin, rattles, bull roarers, and bows of various materials. The score is a beautifully hand-drawn work using graphic representations of musical and programmatic themes. The Kronos Quartet premiered *Mtukwekok Naxkomao* in Scottsdale, Arizona, March 18, 1994, with the composer and Chesley Wilson (who made the traditional instruments for the quartet) in attendance.

The Apache violin, whether in the hands of a master such as Chesley Wilson or classically trained members of a contemporary ensemble such as the Kronos Quartet, shows the durability of an ancient tribal instrument which has adapted well to each new audience and promises to continue to exist for many, many generations.

*Chesley Goseyun Wilson, Eagle Clan Apache, is a singer, maker, and player of traditional Apache violins and flutes. In addition, he is a silversmith, woodcarver, painter, storyteller, model, and actor. Chesley is a frequent singer and dancer in Apache ceremonies held on the San Carlos and Fort Apache Reservations in Arizona and is considered an expert on ga'an (Mountain Spirit) ceremonies.*

*Ruth Longcor-Hamisch Wilson, of mixed Native American and Euro-American descent, is a teacher, musician, folk dancer, and bio-cultural anthropologist. She has served as health and human services administrator for various Native American tribes and urban organizations. Together, Chesley and Ruth Wilson have performed at innumerable museums, schools, churches, cultural fairs, and Native American gatherings throughout the United States.*

*J. Bryan Burton, of mixed Native American and Euro-American descent, is Associate Professor of Music Education at West Chester University of Pennsylvania where he specializes in multicultural music education. His work in this field has taken him as researcher and lecturer to locations throughout east Asia, North America and Europe. He is the author of *Moving Within the Circle: Contemporary Native American Music and Dance* (1993).*

*Professor Burton and the Wilsons have most recently collaborated on the book *When the Earth Was Like New* (World Music Press, PO Box 2565, Danbury, CT 06813), a collection of Apache songs and stories.*



The final stage: decorating the instruments. \*

Photo courtesy of Arizona State Museum, University of Arizona.  
Helga Teiwes, photographer

Chesley Goseyun Wilson's discography includes:

**Apache Eagle Dreams** Eagle Clan Recordings 001, (Eagle Clan Music, 333 South Alvernon, Tucson, Arizona 85711, phone 602/881-4842)

**The Singing Winds** Eagle Clan Recordings 002

**When the Earth Was Like New** World Music Press 015, World Music Press (P.O. Box 2565, Danbury, CT 06813, phone 203/748-1131)

For further information on performances & workshops, or purchase of violins, flutes & recordings, Chesley & Ruth Wilson can be reached at 333 S. Alvernon #60, Tucson AZ 85711-4167. For queries relating to Native American music and instruments in general, contact Professor Burton at 39 Webb Rd., Chadds Ford PA 19317.